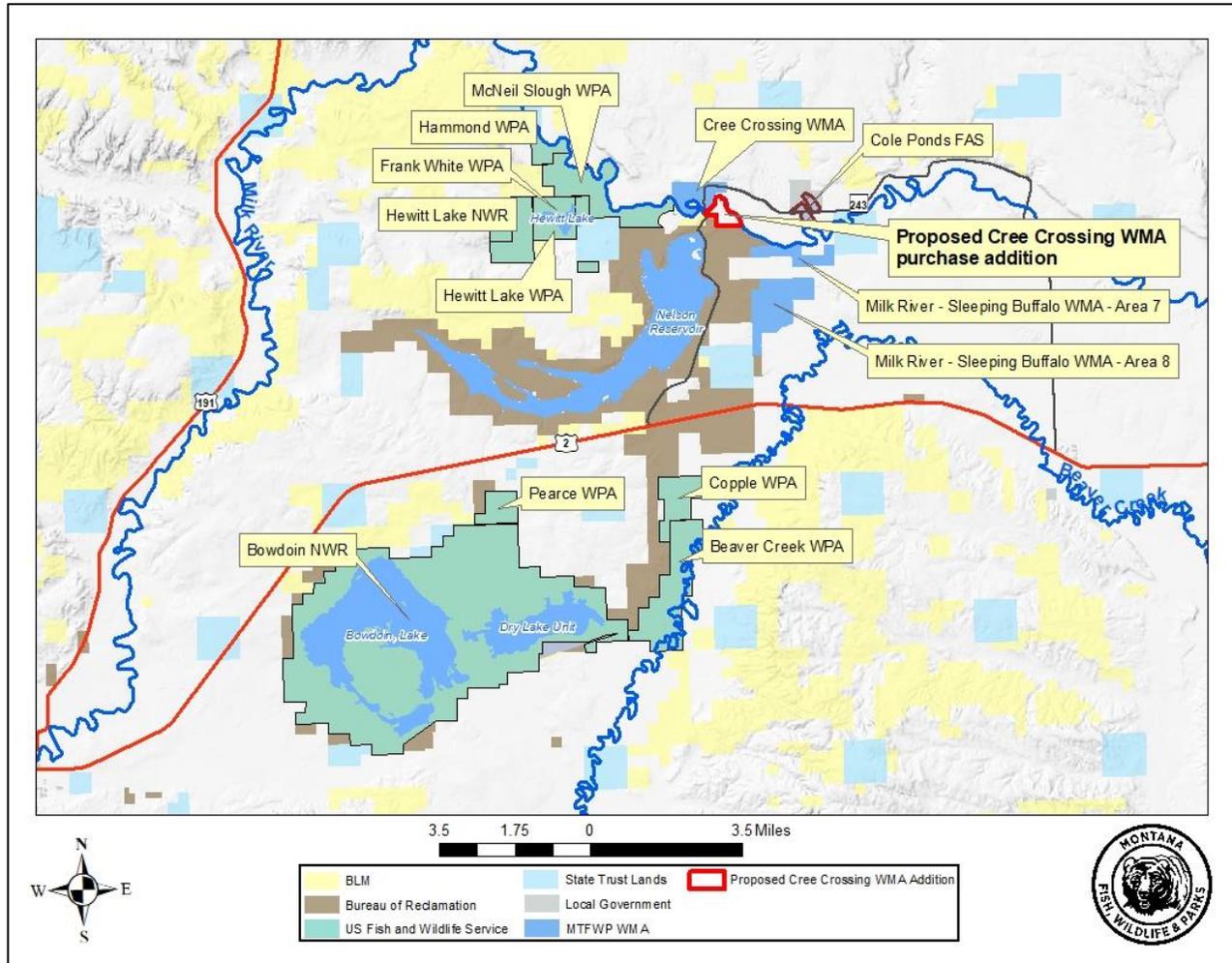


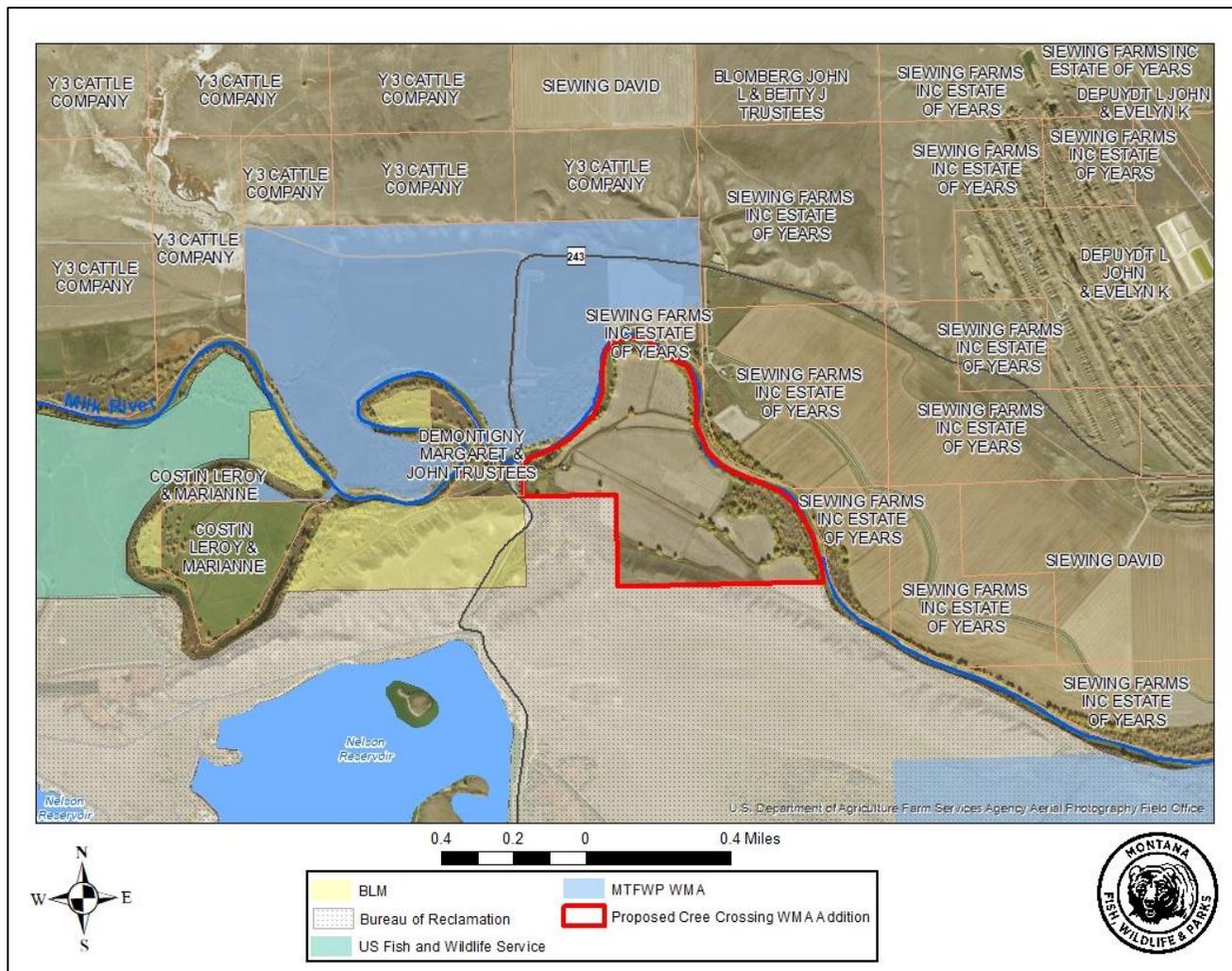
## WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2020)

1. **Region:** 6 **Regional Supervisor:** Mark Sullivan  
**Name of Applicant(s):** Brett Dorak
2. **Date:** 5/20/20
3. **Project Name:** South Cree Crossing Addition to Cree Crossing WMA  
**Type of Project:** Fee Title
4. **Size:** 171.14 acres of private land
5. **Location:** The property is located approximately 20 miles northeast of Malta in Phillips County and FWP Region 6. This property is directly adjacent to the Cree Crossing WMA, with the Milk River separating them, and is a short distance from the Milk River Sleeping Buffalo WMA.
6. **Map(s):** Following two pages



Map 1. Location of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to other landmarks in the area as well as nearby public and conservation lands.



Map 2. Location of the proposed Cree Crossing addition and the ownership of local lands and boundaries that may be affected by the proposal.

**7. Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.**

The proposed addition to the Cree Crossing WMA totals 171 contiguous acres of deeded land along the Milk River. This property has been on and off the market for over the past 10 years. Since habitat improvements on the Cree Crossing WMA are mostly completed, it appears to be an appropriate time to pursue this addition.

The majority of the land, ~115 acres, is comprised of sub irrigated river bottoms that is leased out annually to a local farmer. The other portion of the property consists of native vegetation that is a mix of historic cottonwood floodplain, a small oxbow wetland, mixed shrub and grassland (Appendix C), and 1.4 miles of riparian habitat along the Milk River. The property falls within the Glaciated Plains Focus Area of Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy and specifically consists of riparian/wetland and mixed shrub/grass community types.

This project would fit in the Commission policy by maintaining and actively improving wildlife habitat and the natural communities for present and future generations in respect to the native habitat that is already present and through restoration over time to expand upon the present riparian and upland wildlife habitats. Cree Crossing WMA's management plan, and the associated ag lease, would be expanded to include this property to help guide future management and promote habitat-friendly agriculture and wildlife habitat. This will help conserve and enhance land, water, and wildlife values within the area and perpetually protect them.

The current landowners do not allow general public access for hunting, fishing, or recreational activities and the purchase and improvement of the habitats on this parcel will contribute to all forms of recreation.

**8. Statewide Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.**

- Tier I Community Type – Floodplain and Riparian
  - ~23% of the property
- Tier I Community Type - Lowland/Prairie Grassland
  - ~10% of the property
- ~67% tillage cropland
  - The intended management of these acres is to restore them back to historic habitats by increasing the width of the riparian forest along the Milk River corridor and plant other portions back to grass and forb communities, while allowing for natural shrub expansion.
  - If the project was approved, after restoration activities approximately 40 acres would remain in small grain production with approximately 10 acres left standing for wildlife and an additional 10 acres planted in annual food plots equating to 50 acres (~29%)
- 1.4 miles of Milk River

## 9. Project-Level Strategic Criteria

### a) **Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.**

The USDA FSA records indicate that more than 75% of the riparian and shrub grassland habitat along the Milk River has been converted to grain and domestic hay production. In addition to agricultural expansion along the Milk River the river's continual flow has caused the incision of the river deeper into its banks causing small fragments of riparian habitat to slough off.

Management practices can be implemented along the banks to increase bank stability and reduce erosion, while provided increased habitat values for resident and migratory wildlife species with additional wetland improvements along the riparian area and associated habitats (Appendix A, Figure 1).

Improved habitats on the Cree Crossing WMA on the north side of this proposed project have led to many of the bird ( $n = 56$ ) and bat species ( $n = 6$ ) that are identified as Species of Greatest Concern in this community type to be observed during the Milk River Initiative (Appendix B, Tables 1–2). This proposal also falls within an area that has a high proportion of grass, shown by the calculated quadrangles with 50% or greater of grass cover, which are considered a high priority in FWP's Working Grasslands Initiative (Appendix A, Figure 2). Additionally, this proposed property lies within overlapping core habitats of declining grassland songbirds (Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, McCown's longspur, and Baird's sparrow) as well as within a high density of breeding duck pairs (40-60 duck pairs per square mile) in Montana's Thunderstorm Map and is in close proximity to a hotspot of 100-126 duck pairs per square mile (Appendix A, Figure 3–7). On top of that, the property finds itself directly adjacent to a mapped pronghorn migration corridor, which have become a priority for National and all western states to maintain and improve through habitat conservation and restoration goals, through the Secretarial Order 3362 (Appendix A, Figure 8).

### b) **Threat Status:**

#### ○ **IMMINENT - 10 pts:**

This land is currently for sale and most of it has been converted to small grain agriculture. If the land was to be purchased there is the potential that the remaining native acreage could also be turned into small grain agricultural crops and cause irreversible habitat and erosion damages (Appendix A, Figure 9). The other potential is that this property could be purchased and turned into small cabin or home sites due to its proximity to Nelson Reservoir, the Sleeping Buffalo Hot Springs, and all the available outdoor recreation in the area. New developments have been increasing in the area with cabins being built on small parcels, similar to this one, within recent years.

**c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.**

- Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) Yes, this proposal occurs within the Milk River Regional Focus Area
- Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) Yes, this proposal falls within the Priority Area D for the Montana State Action Plan as part of the multi-agency, Secretarial Order 3362 – Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors.
- Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts) Yes, this proposal falls within Phillips County, which is within a FWP Grassland Initiative priority county, and approximately ~10% of the property is still in native Grassland Systems and the management goal for this property would be to expand on existing grassland habitat through planting back a lot of the agricultural area to grass species.
- Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts) Yes, this proposal falls within the Priority Area D of the Montana State Action Plan as part of the Secretarial Order 3362 for Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors. Additionally, this proposal falls within the Swift Fox Conservation Strategy and would help with two of the plan's four priorities (Plan Priority 2. Conserve Swift Fox Habitat and Movement Corridors and Plan Priority 4. Increase Distribution of Swift Fox into Suitable, Connected Habitats)
- Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor? (3 pts) Yes, it is within the Milk River corridor, identified as an area of high ecological importance and value through the Milk River Initiative, and is directly adjacent to an identified pronghorn migration corridor.

**d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.**

The property is in one contiguous piece and is configured in a way that will provide a clean slate to increase habitat and improve current habitat values within its respective boundaries as well as provide another puzzle piece in a much larger network of conservation properties. This property is adjacent to BOR and BLM lands as well as is across the Milk River from FWP's Cree Crossing WMA. Over the past 5-10 years the USFWS has been able to acquire parcels within close proximity of this property and has perpetually protected them as Waterfowl Production Areas. A list of nearby FWP properties and USFWS properties, their respective acreage, and their distance from the property are below and can be seen in the first map under Section 6.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Cree Crossing WMA – 401.7 acres, adjacent property

Milk River – Sleeping Buffalo WMA – Area 7 – 389.6 acres, 0.5 miles  
Milk River – Sleeping Buffalo WMA – Area 8 – 929.6 acres, 1.3 miles  
Cole Ponds FAS – 149 acres, 1.2 miles

USFWS

Hewitt Lake NWR – 717.9 acres, 4 miles  
Bowdoin NWR – 15550.4 acres, 8.3 miles  
McNeil Slough WPA – 1301.5 acres, 0.7 miles  
Hammond WPA – 246 acres, 3.4 miles  
Frank White WPA – 480 acres, 3 miles  
Hewitt Lake WPA – 320 acres, 3 miles  
Copple WPA – 604.2 acres, 5.8 miles  
Beaver Creek WPA – 1603.3 acres, 6.8 miles  
Pearce WPA – 399 acres, 7.6 miles

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.**

Public land in this area is heavily utilized throughout the year, but especially for hunting, and more specifically for pheasant and white-tailed deer. Due to the lack of access on private land in the area, hunting opportunities on public land are highly cherished. This property would be incorporated into the adjacent Cree Crossing WMA and would be managed similarly. There is good access from adjacent BOR lands along the entire southern border of the property. It is estimated that a minimum of 500-750 hunter days per year would likely occur on the property as well as 150-200 fishing day along the Milk River. In addition to hunting and fishing on the property there is a lot of birding that occurs in the area and will likely occur on the property. Over recent years there has also been a lot of people out picking berries, foraging, shed hunting, and exploring the areas that will also lead to many more recreational days on the property.

f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.**

There will not need to be any infrastructure for management as a pole building is already being built on the Cree Crossing WMA adjacent to this property where equipment and tool would be stored. This property would be added to the Cree Crossing WMA management plan and would have the agricultural fields managed through the agricultural lease agreement associated with that plan. The future lease holder would be responsible for the agricultural planting (including the food plots) and for weed control and maintenance. If any grazing was done in the future the lease holder would bring in temporary fencing during the agreed upon season of use and then have it removed the rest of the year. Habitat restoration on some of the agricultural fields provides a clean slate to work with and will be more than likely planted by the wildlife management technician and the local biologist. The potential purchase and restoration of this property have already been

discussed with the state biologist and regional representative with the National Wild Turkey Federation and Pheasants Forever, respectively, and both are interested in partnering on the project. There is one building on the property that will more than likely need to be removed if purchased and there appears to be minimal weeds issues on the property. The most recent irrigation, Conservation District, and other taxes for the property amount to \$3,966.87.

APPEDIX A.

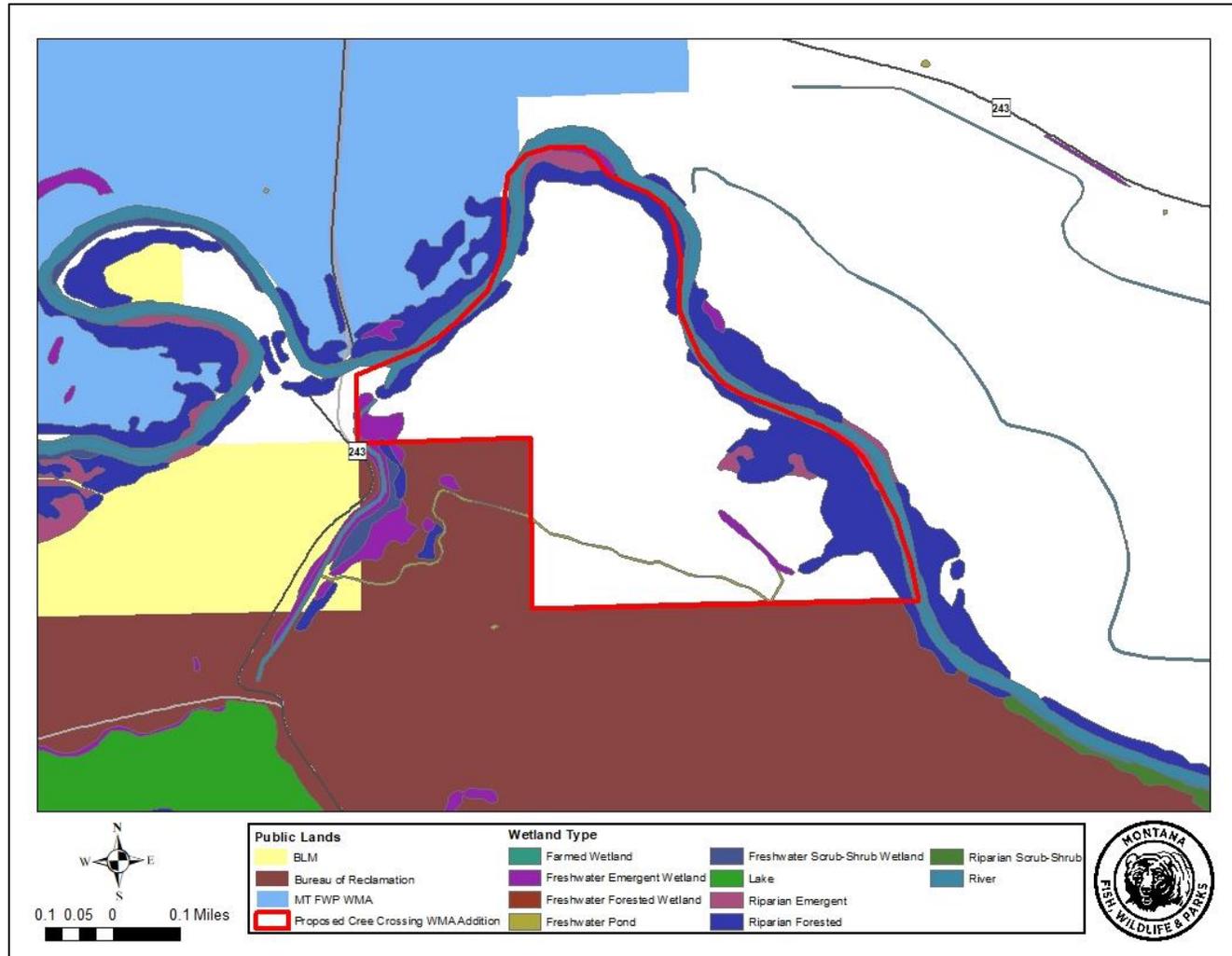


Figure 1. Map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition and the associated wetland types on the property and in the adjacent area.

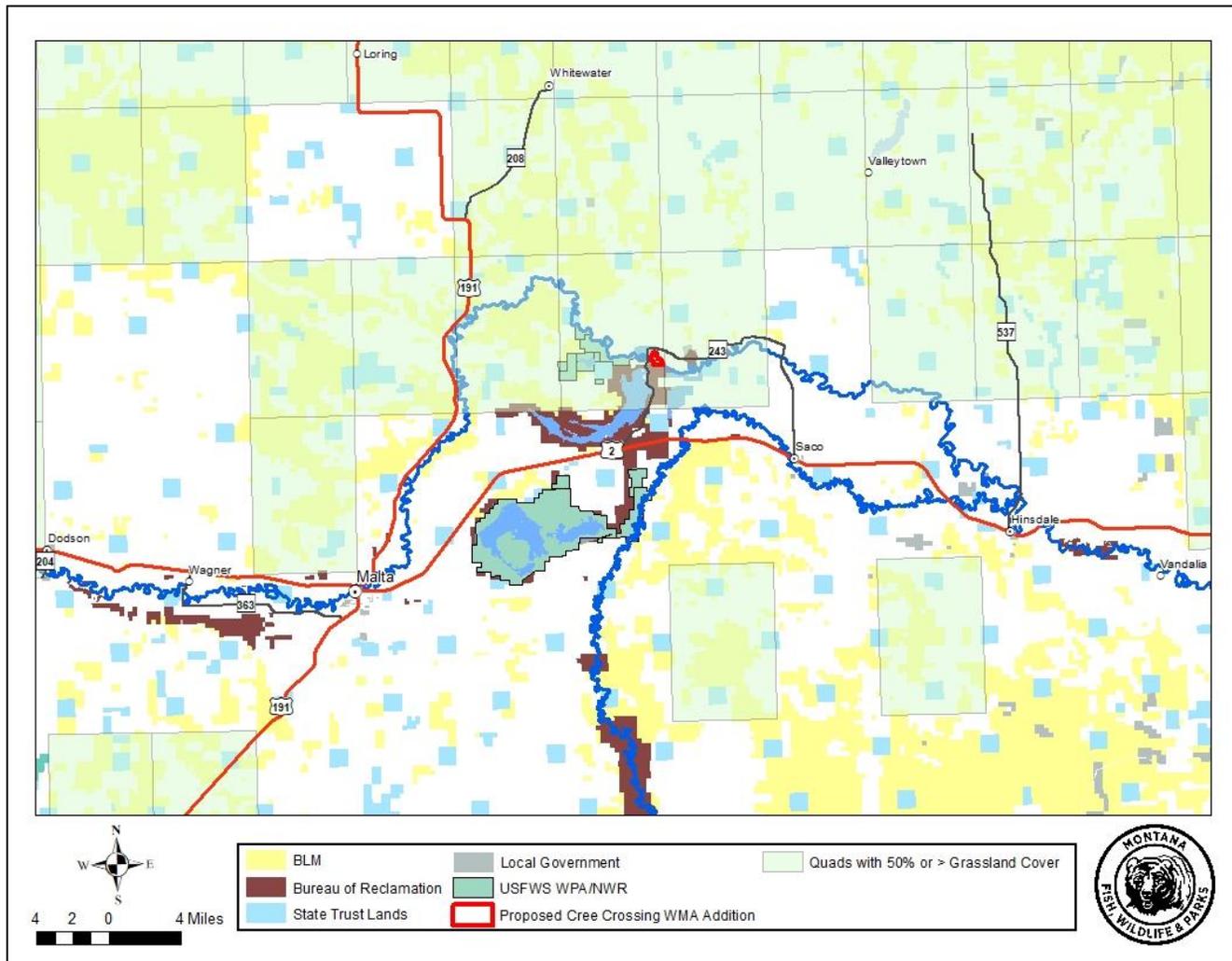


Figure 2. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition and its location in respect to the quadrangles with 50% or greater grass cover that are a high priority in FWP's Working Grasslands Initiative.

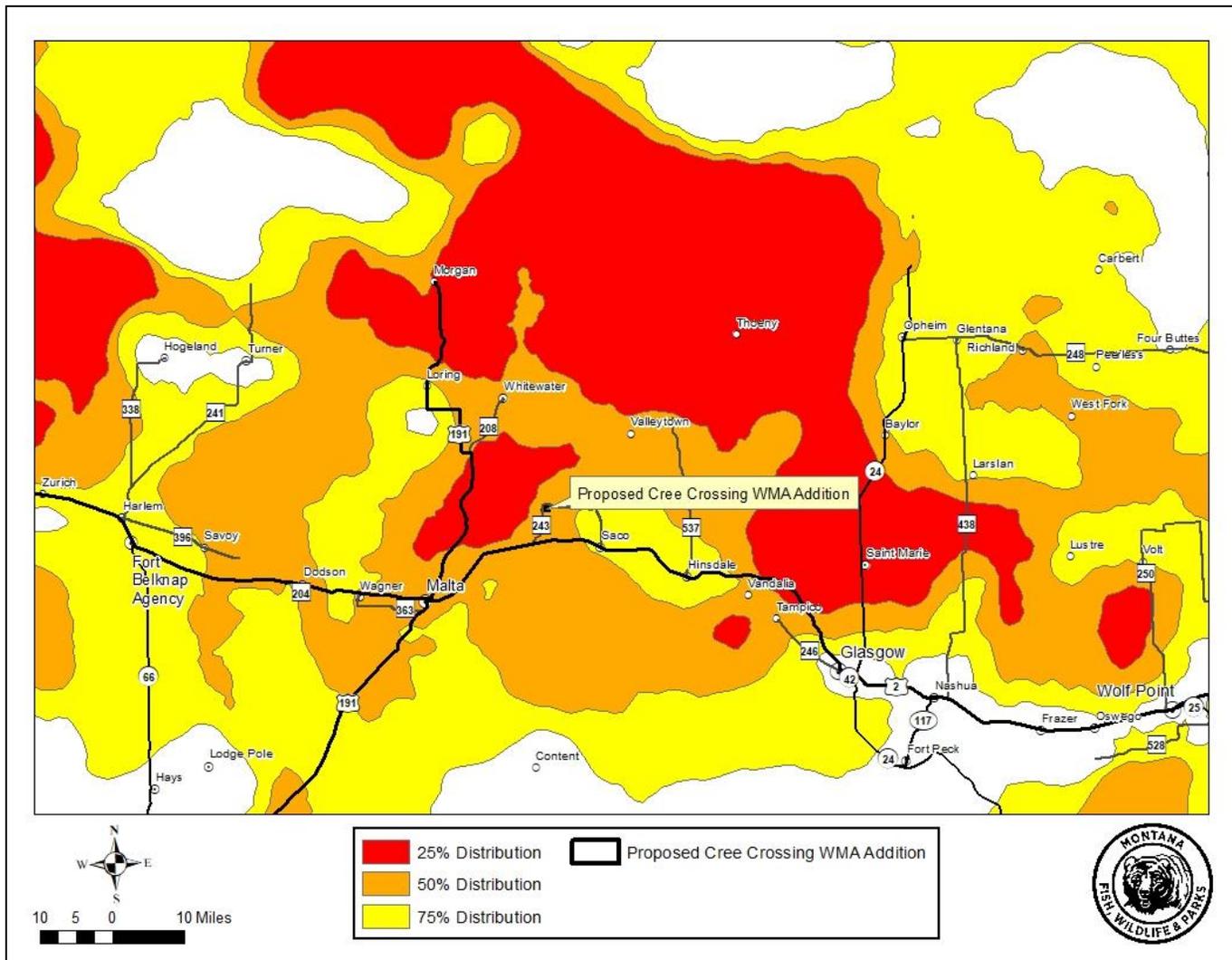


Figure 3. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to the highest predicted global concentration for the Sprague's pipit in its breeding range.

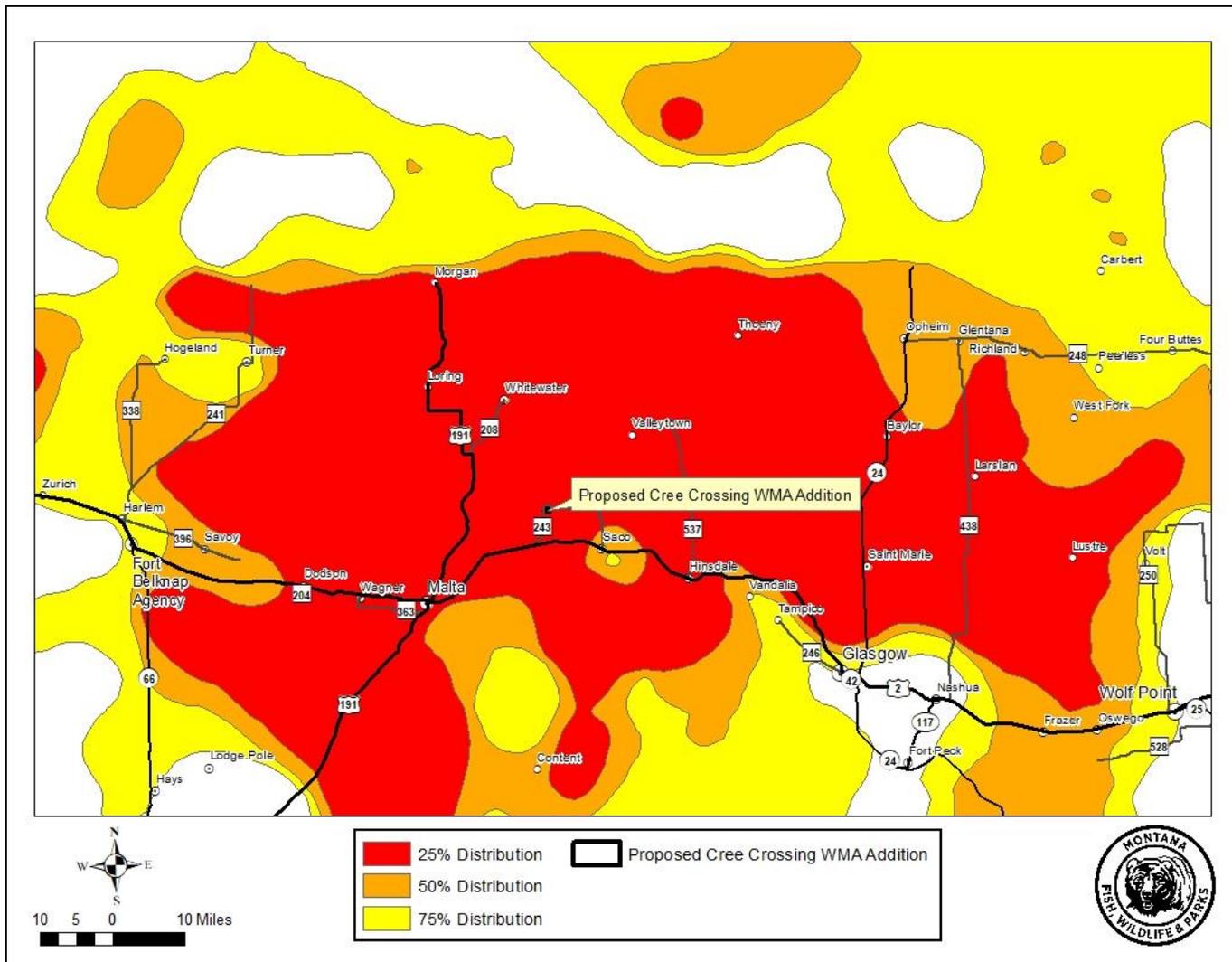


Figure 4. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to the highest predicted global concentration for the Chestnut-collared longspur in its breeding range.

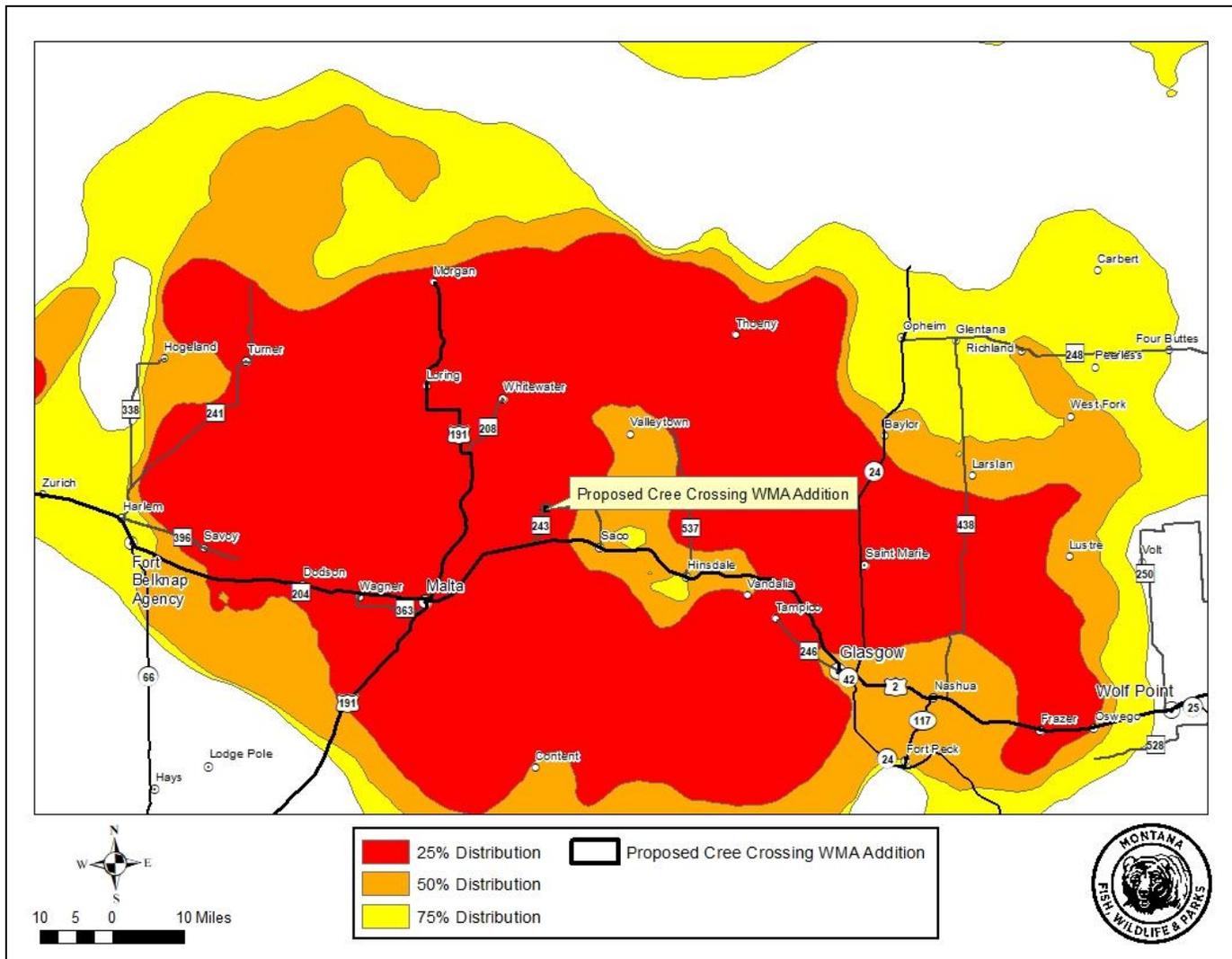


Figure 5. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to the highest predicted global concentration for the McCown's longspur in its breeding range.

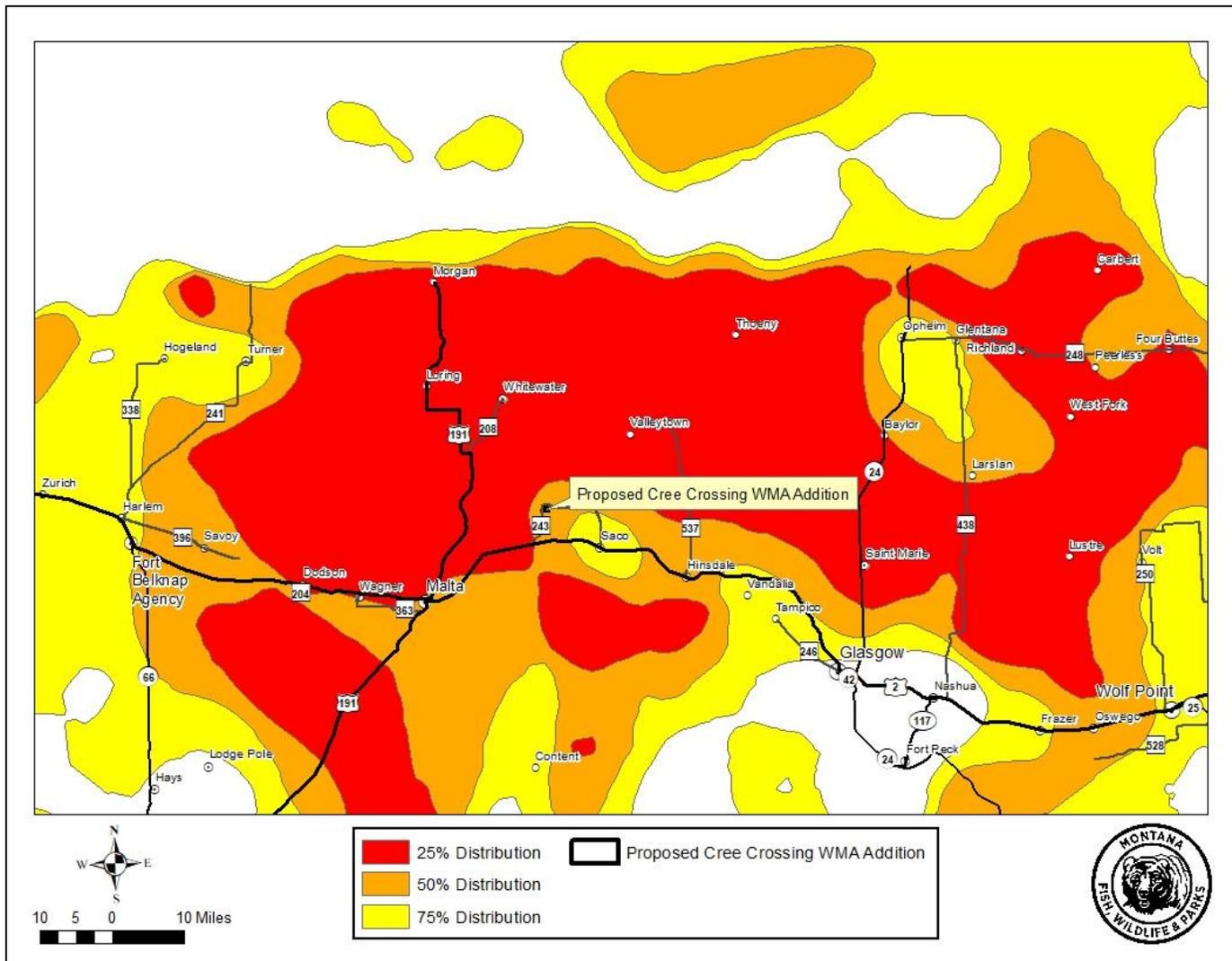


Figure 6. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to the highest predicted global concentration for the Baird's sparrow in its breeding range.

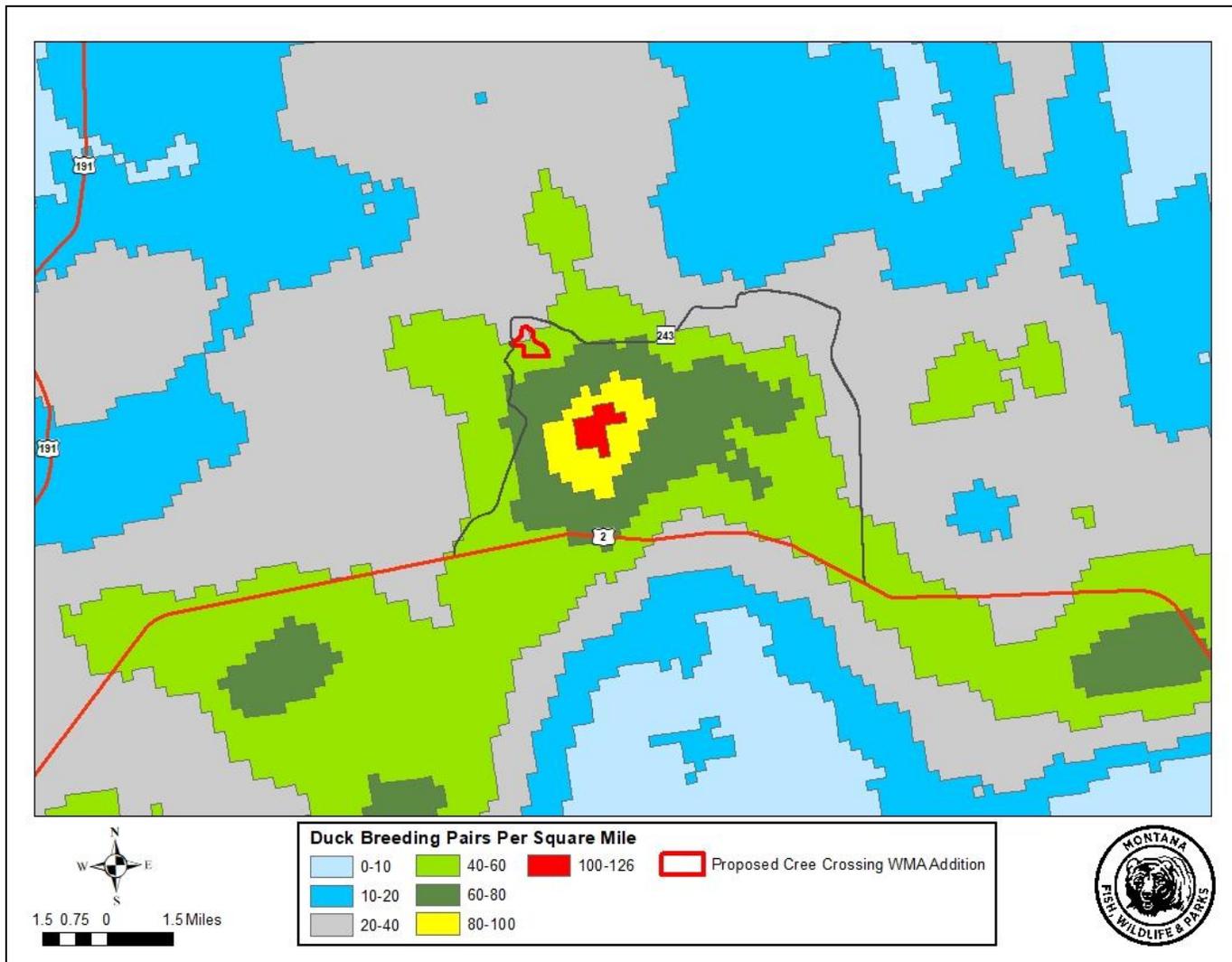


Figure 7. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to the Montana Thunderstorm map depicting the density of breeding pairs of waterfowl.

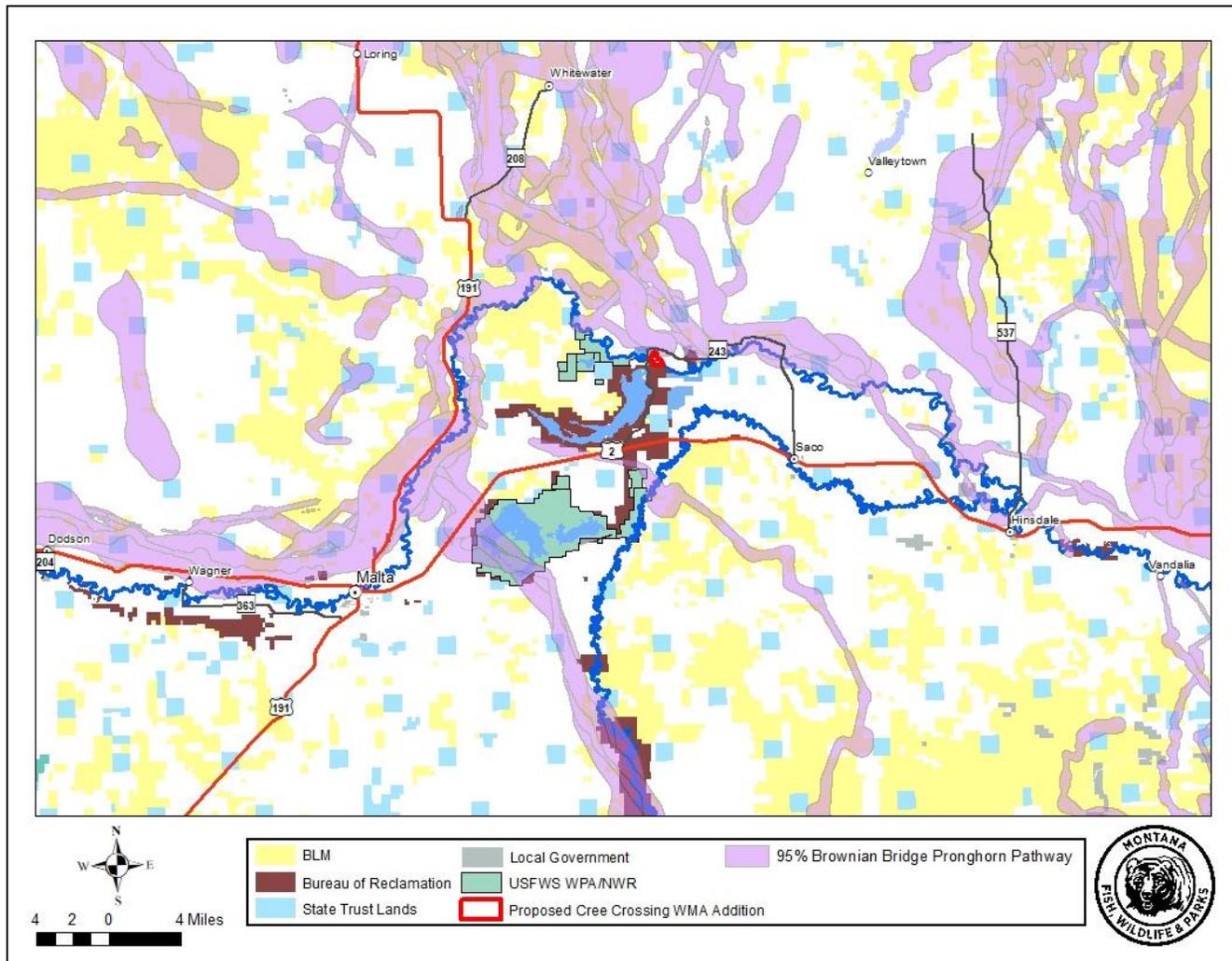


Figure 8. Location map of the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition in relation to map 95% Brownian Bridge pronghorn pathway, migration corridors.



Figure 9. Aerial imagery showing the agricultural fields, their size, and the adjacent native habitats. Field sizes and locations provide a good situation to restore habit values over time.

## APPENDIX B.

Table 1. List of bird species identified during the native species monitoring, both daytime and nocturnal surveys, as part of the Milk River Initiative project on the Cree Crossing WMA from 2008–2011. (\*Montana Species of Concern, ^Incidental observation outside of point-count survey times)

Common Name	Scientific Name
American Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
American White Pelican*	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
Bullock's Oriole	<i>Icterus bullockii</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>
Clay-colored Sparrow	<i>Spizella pallida</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>
Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Common Nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles minor</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>
Eastern Screech Owl	<i>Megascopis asio</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Grasshopper Sparrow	<i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>
Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
McCown's Longspur*	<i>Calcarius mccownii</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>

Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>
Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Red-headed Woodpecker*^	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Upland Sandpiper	<i>Bartramia longicauda</i>
Vesper Sparrow	<i>Poocetes gramineus</i>
Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo gilvus</i>
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>
Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>
Western Wood-pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus</i>
Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>

Table 1. List of bat species identified during the native species monitoring surveys as part of the Milk River Initiative project on the Cree Crossing WMA from 2008–2011.

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
Big Brown Bat	<i>Eptesius fuscus</i>
Little Brown Myotis	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>
Long-legged Myotis	<i>Myotis volans</i>
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>
Silver-haired Bat	<i>Lasionycteris noctivagans</i>
Small-footed Myotis	<i>Myotis ciliolabrum</i>

**APPENDIX C**



Photo 1. Riparian understory and overstory located along the Milk River on the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition.



Photo 2. Transition from the grassland habitat to the agricultural fields on the proposed Cree Crossing WMA addition.